THE CONGRESS
OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 263 (2009)[1]
The digital divide and e-inclusion in the regions

1. The information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be factors for economic, social and human development. They can also help to make public authorities and the services they provide more open, transparent and efficient.

2. If they are to have a positive impact, ICTs must be available to each and every citizen and their development must not be left entirely in the hands of the private sector, as this would entail a risk of certain socially relevant but unprofitable sectors being neglected.

3. Today, despite the efforts and initiatives of, among others, the European Commission and certain states, the rapid growth of ICTs is gradually increasing the socio-economic inequality between citizens and between countries and creating a "digital divide", or e-exclusion, which is set to worsen unless co-ordinated action is taken.

4. There are also regional disparities within countries regarding urban and rural communities – 52% of urban Europeans were regular Internet users in 2006 as compared with 30% of rural Europeans. In Europe's rural regions, nearly 3 people out of every 10 do not have access to a high-speed connection.

5. Considering the importance of Internet access in job-seeking and the impact it can have on business location, fair Internet access should be a priority in public policy and a right, in the same way as connection to the water and electricity networks and access to the road network.

6. However, access alone does not mean use: efforts targeted at awareness-raising and continuing education can lead to a significant reduction in disparities.

7. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is convinced that public authorities have a major responsibility for creating the conditions to allow the information society to develop towards e-inclusion of citizens, while contributing to balanced regional development which allows Europe's most disadvantaged regions to enjoy a fuller social, cultural and economic life.

8. Public authorities have, in particular, a key role to play in regulation. The market alone cannot be allowed to dictate who will be entitled to high connection speeds, who will or will not be entitled to Internet access or to determine the acceptable degree of e-accessibility of websites. Rather than being simply promoters of infrastructure projects, local and regional authorities have a role to play as planners, suppliers and decision makers serving the general interest.

9. *In the light of the foregoing, the Congress asks the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe* to call on the relevant body that will carry on the work of the Ad hoc Committee on E-Democracy (CAHDE) to include the issue of the digital divide in its discussions.

10. *The Congress recommends that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe call on member states to:*

a. frame coherent and effective e-inclusion policies and legislation at national and European level, linking in with existing or yet to be established digital local/regional agendas;

b. ensure a balanced deployment of telecommunications infrastructure –that is, the "right connection speed" for everyone – while also ensuring, in particular through regulations, that market forces are counterbalanced by the public interest;

c. ensure the provision of affordable or free public Internet access by maintaining free public access points in the countries that have them or, in the case of countries lacking this type of arrangement or the resources to implement such a policy, relying on agreements with private operators;

d. envisage targeted tax measures, in partnership with business, with the aim of helping low-income households to acquire computer equipment by making part of the cost deductible from taxable income;

e. standardise digital training provision in Europe in order to facilitate the upgrading of posts and redeployment, in order to ensure that this training provision evolves, like the ICTs themselves, and is qualification-oriented and, for this purpose, propose guidelines and recognition at European level of training given at public Internet access points;

f. provide good online public services in order to develop high-quality use that can contribute to stronger social inclusion:

i. by enhancing the quality of services in terms of accessibility, user-friendliness and affordability in line with the recommendations of the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C);

ii. by strengthening the legal framework in order to encourage the development and promotion of accessibility standards, in line with the European Union's Riga Declaration, under which all websites are to be brought into line with common standards and web accessibility practices by 2010;

iii. by making digital accessibility an eligibility criterion for responses to public invitations to tender concerning the development of digital services or software;

iv. by harmonising national accessibility guidelines in order to clarify the meaning of accessibility, which is still not well understood, making it easier to train those involved and making it possible to take account of accessibility rules in web page design tools;

g. help non-users and those deprived of access to overcome any psychological barriers by specifically targeting non-Internet-users and circulating information via the media

most likely to reach the target groups (housewives, job-seekers, older people, immigrants, etc.);

h. facilitate the provision of IT equipment and content to schools through the development of Internet access points and digital working environments to make them the ideal places for reducing the social and digital divide and transmitting knowledge beyond the school (knowledge shared with parents, for example);

i. show digital solidarity with the developing countries by setting up co-operation projects (learning, development of local content, provision of equipment for schools, etc.);

j. encourage the development of the new generation of platforms and services, often described as Web 2.0, for its economic prospects (business start-ups) and for its potential role in reducing the digital divide, since the new forms of use and self-produced digital content of Web 2.0, which are not available on the "traditional" media (photo sharing, etc.), mean a greater incentive to use the Internet.

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1. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Regions on 4 March 2009 and adopted by the Congress on 5 March 2009, 3rd Sitting (see Document CPR(16)1REP, explanatory memorandum, rapporteur: J.-M. Bourjac (France, R, SOC)).

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